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The Mutual Shaping of Faith, State-Building, and Scientific Revolution with Religious Change in Baroque Europe

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Abstract. This paper investigates the deep transformation of religious ideas and the process of secularization in Europe during the Baroque era. While many current historical perspectives view secularization as a linear and mono-directional process driven by numerous factors that caused the decline of religious authority, they frequently overlook the dynamic reciprocity between historical catalysts and religious change. To address this problem, this study argues that religious change wasn't simply a passive effect of broader historical changes, but rather a process of mutual shaping and reciprocal influence shaped by numerous factors. This paper not only upholds the original perspective that factors such as the Protestant Reformation, early modern state-building, and the Scientific Revolution shaped the shifting nature of faith, but also examines how religious change promoted these three factors. Specifically, it explores how these political, institutional, and scientific forces privatized faith into an individual pursuit of salvation, and conversely, how this continuously evolving religious ideology expedited the Reformation, national centralization, and early capitalism, and the birth of a rationalist "modernity framework." Ultimately, this intricate web of mutual cause and effect would converge and forge the unique modern secular and spiritual identity of European civilization.

Keywords: Religious change, secularization, Baroque Europe, state-building, Scientific Revolution

1. Introduction

The Baroque era of Europe, which spans the late 16th to the early 18th centuries, encompassed numerous wars, upheavals, and dramatic ideological shifts that challenged traditional European belief systems. It is a period of transition from the Medieval religious uniformity to a modern secular order. During this period, Western society experienced the simultaneous convergence of three most significant shifts: the fragmentation of religious uniformity and the decline in the power of the Roman Catholic Church due to the Reformation; the birth and development of modern state building; and the vitalization of scientific discoveries that subsequently induced the gradual formation of a "modernity framework".

Current historical accounts frequently view secularization more as a monodirectional and linear process [1]. These accounts suggest that it was the decline of religious authority, combined with the establishment of strong secular political powers and rationalism that championed scientific inquiries,

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that ultimately subjugated religious devotion. However, such a view tends to overlook the reciprocity and the dynamic relationship among these factors and religious change. This paper argues that the transformation of religious ideas during the Baroque period of Europe was not merely an effect of the above-mentioned three shifts, but rather a process of mutual shaping and reciprocal influence. It was the continuously evolving political, institutional, and scientific forces that shifted religion from a matter of compulsory state regulation to a more individual activity in pursuing spiritual salvation; meanwhile, this shifting nature of faith also expedited the development of the Protestant Reformation, the governmental bureaucracy, and the scientific revolution. Ultimately, this intricate web of mutual cause and effect would converge into the secularization of European civilization, forging the secular and spiritual identity of modern Europe. It's important to note that his paper mainly focuses on one side: how those three factors contributed to religious transformation and eventually to secularization.

2. The mutual shaping relationship between the reformation and religious ideological change

The Protestant Reformation, spanning from 1517 to the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, completely dismantled the religious uniformity of the Middle Ages. By emphasizing personal interpretation of scripture, it privatized faith and made religion a personal spiritual salvation instead of a regulation by the state, laying the foundation on which politics became the most major consideration among states. Meanwhile, these ideological change promoted the Reformation by giving rise to the "early modern monarchs", improving literacy rates and education, and causing the "Counter-Reformation" by the Catholic Church.

To comprehend this transformation, it is fundamental to examine the Northern Renaissance. Northern Humanists, spearheaded by Erasmus, advocated that Christianity should serve as an internal guiding philosophy of life, rather than a system of dogmatic beliefs and compulsory rituals. By endorsing internal piety over external forms of belief, such as buying religious relics, they stressed the importance of ordinary believers to engage directly with Biblical texts [2]. These initial views on individualism and religious internalization made up the prelude of the Reformation.

Then came the doctrinal rupture catalyzed by Martin Luther in 1517, shattering Catholic uniformity. Numerous Protestant sects sprang up, and they shared common traits that accelerated religious ideological change: emphasizing the autonomous dialogue between individual souls and the Scripture, recognizing the Bible as the sole authority, and declaring salvation a gift from God through faith alone, rather than necessitating numerous convoluted rituals [3]. By doing so, Protestantism promoted personal worship and dismantled the rigid Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, religious authority began to lose its medieval dominating power and its political significance.

The destruction of the old religious order induced numerous devastating religious wars, culminating in the Thirty Years' War. Initially driven by the religious fervor of Protestants and Catholics, the conflict would become increasingly secular, which eventually evolved into a political struggle between the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 marked an end to this war; in this treaty, the Holy Roman Empire's states were officially granted the right to determine the religion within their realms. Also, it established that governmental power could not interfere with private veneration when subjects practiced a religion different from the official church. Therefore, the significance of religion in state politics sharply declined as political motives became the guiding forces in international affairs, forcing states to operate within a secular framework [4].

Conversely, religious change substantially influenced the rise of early modern monarchs in England, France, and Spain. Recognizing the localization and individualization of faith, these

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secular monarchs would either establish national churches or employ religious toleration to clear obstacles to centralize state power. Henry VIII's 1534 Act of Supremacy made him the supreme head of the Anglican Church. This officially separated England from papal control, which paved the way for the moderate religious policies during the Elizabethan Period. Likewise, after the War of the Three Henrys, Henry IV of France settled the chaotic domestic situation by converting to Catholicism. The subsequent passage of the Edict of Nantes protected the legal rights of Huguenots to worship in certain areas and maintain fortified cities, making him popular in France and becoming a precursor of religious toleration.

On the other hand, Philip II of Spain went in the opposite direction. He tried to reverse the tendency toward individualization and utilized all means to protect religious uniformity. Having a strict commitment to Catholicism, he expanded the use of the Inquisition to punish Protestant heretics and also imposed a militant form of Catholicism, waging numerous wars to punish Protestant rebellions inside his realm and even other Protestant countries such as England. As shown by the defeat of the Armada and Dutch independence, these attempts failed and led to Spain's decline, making it a symbol of using religion to enforce centralization.

Moreover, significant results of religious change on the progress of the Reformation happened beyond politics. The emphasis on personal interpretation of the Bible during the Reformation, aided by the invention of the Gutenberg Printing Press, significantly promoted the development of education and its extension to lower classes and, conversely, stimulated the Reformation. Unlike Renaissance humanist education, which aimed at the elites, Protestant-appealing education targeted a wider audience. Consequently, public schools were built, literacy rates improved drastically, and Reformation ideas were disseminated quickly throughout Europe.

In response to the schism of faith caused by the Reformation and the dramatic change in the status of religion, the Catholic Church itself began a process of "Counter-Reformation." In the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church reaffirmed its doctrines and made minor changes to its beliefs [3]. However, it made a huge contribution to Baroque art. To stimulate emotional reverence, the church utilized dramatic styles, powerful visual effects, and illusions blending painting with sculpture to counter Protestant simplicity. Later, this artistic style, originally aimed at glorifying God, was adapted by absolute monarchs to glorify themselves.

3. The mutual shaping relationship between state-building and religious change

The Baroque era witnessed waves of state-building and the pathway toward political modernization, and religion played a significant role during this process. While religion increasingly became a personal belief and connection with the divine, in some other countries, state building promoted religious change by turning it into an effective tool in maintaining governmental centralization. Inversely, religious change also promoted state building by directly giving rise to absolutism and stimulating commercial interaction overseas, which would lead to a huge economic growth, the establishment of a modern financial outlook, and the emergence of capitalism in several states.

While the Reformation decreased religion's significance in international politics, it empowered secular monarchs to tighten domestic control. For instance, monarchs in France and Russia turned religion into an effective tool for strengthening royal authority. Under Cardinal Richelieu, France's centralization eliminated the Huguenots' military rights while preserving their right to worship. However, Louis XIV enforced radical religious changes to corroborate his power, such as superseding the Edict of Nantes with the Edict of Fontainebleau. This new edict sharply curtailed Huguenots' rights, abolished toleration, and destroyed Protestant churches and schools. By doing so,

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Louis XIV tightly controlled religion to maintain sovereignty, accomplishing his motto "One king, one law, one faith" [5].

Similarly, state-building under Peter the Great transformed Russia's traditional religious structures. To strengthen centralization and boost governmental efficiency, Peter abolished the patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church and established the "Holy Synod", which was led by clergy that represented the czar's interests. This enabled him to achieve total dominance over religious affairs.

Nonetheless, some states pursued moderate political paths that established religious toleration, such as that of England and the Dutch Republic. Queen Elizabeth I established a moderate religious settlement through the 39 Articles, in which Anglican doctrines served as a middle ground to satisfy both Protestants and Catholics. Through this political settlement, relative toleration was preserved as religion became more personal and less entangled with major political actions. The Dutch Republic experienced a similar path after the Thirty Years' War. Its diverse social ambiance and rising economic status became the engine of forming a unique religious environment in which the cultures of Calvinists, Catholics, and Jews blended. This multicultural trait prompted the Dutch to adopt relatively liberal policies that ensured faith to become increasingly personal.

Reciprocally, religious change also promoted state-building by causing the rise of absolutism. As secular motives became the driving force after the Thirty Years' War, kings were freed from papal control, granting them power to develop absolutism through professional standing armies, bureaucratic rearrangements, and the regulation of religion. To both tackle the upheavals generated by multiple peasant revolts in the aftermath of the Reformation and to reinforce central government control, kings in some countries, such as France and Russia, began to establish standing armies, giving them an easy way to crush domestic revolts and maintain power. Absolutism was also strengthened by bureaucratic emanations. For instance, Cardinal Richelieu of France reordered the provinces and established "intendants" to get more direct control of local politics. Louis XIV would continue to utilize this system to maintain his centralization. A direct regulation of religion also manifested an increase in the power of kings, as shown in the Edict of Fontainebleau, which replaced the Edict of Nantes.

Outside of France, states embraced absolutism in response to religious change, exemplified by Prussia. The Peace of Westphalia granted the Holy Roman Empire's states wide autonomy, which enabled Prussia to rise by devising an efficient bureaucratic system that subordinated the local nobility (Junkers) to royal control. The king of Prussia, such as Frederick I, made a deal with the nobles by granting them tax exemptions, the highest officers in the army and the government, and almost unlimited power over their serfs, which ultimately strengthened serfdom. By making Junkers as officials and instilling service and loyalty to the king into the value of nobles, the king created a synonymous relationship between the Junkers, the army, and the king, establishing the traditional Prussian system—the military value now became the nobles' value, and in turn, the officials' value. A strong standing army was also built to tighten domestic control.

Nevertheless, some states did not embrace absolutism in their state-building in response to religious change and instead turned to a more liberal and progressive form of government, such as the Netherlands and England. In these countries, religious change led to expanded commercial interaction, social diversity, and the rise of commercial states caused by economic progress. In the Netherlands, its independence from Spain and Calvinist background created a peculiar environment that preserved religious freedom and cultural diversity. The Calvinist emphasis on secular wealth as a sign of predestination also fueled Dutch oversea exploration, leading to the establishment of the Dutch East India Company, a precursor to joint-stock capitalism [6]. To better raise capital to fuel

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large economic ventures, the Bank of Amsterdam was created, and later the Amsterdam Stock Exchange separated profits and risks into individual shares: all of which made significant progress toward financial modernization that marked its "Golden Ages" in the 17th century, and these developments can all be traced back to religious change. England, similarly, experienced cultural and economic development after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, which replaced Spain as a major colonial power. It also established the British East India Company, a stride towards capitalism. However, the uniqueness of England lay in its delicate relationship between the king and the Parliament, in which the Parliament mostly held the power of the purse, forming a delicate balance of power over a long time. When the Stuart monarchs attempted to outcompete Parliament in the seventeenth century, a civil war eventually broke out and ultimately contributed to the unique constitutional monarchy system.

4. The mutual shaping relationship between the scientific revolution and religious change

The Scientific Revolution began during the Renaissance and reached its peak in the Baroque period, in which unprecedented waves of scientific discoveries in physics, math, and chemistry flowed through the European society. With its new explanation of natural phenomena, the Scientific Revolution undermined religious and Biblical authority. But at the same time, it gave rise to a new form of "religion"—deism, an important aspect of the "Modernity Project", which centered on reason, science, progressivism, and deism [7]. Meanwhile, this religious change reciprocally contributed to scientific development, as scholars used rational empirical observation to comprehend the world. Some Protestants also viewed the discovery of nature through scientific methods as a theological duty to glorify God.

One of the most direct results of the Scientific Revolution on religion was the decline of traditional religious authorities. Scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo proposed new explanations on mechanics and planetary motion based on meticulous observation, documentary, and math calculations. However, their theories often contradict Holy Scripture and Catholic authority. Finally, Isaac Newton summarized his predecessors' theories and laid the foundation for classical mechanics. By his laws on mechanics and gravitation, he demonstrated that natural phenomena are predictable, mathematically calculable, and governed by universal principles—from a falling apple to planetary motion. This vast scientific progress led people to further question the "undeniable truth" of the Holy Bible and the divine intervention of God, fostering a skeptical attitude that challenged the Church's monopoly over knowledge and gradually eroded its power and prestige.

However, religion was still far from disappearance. Newton himself was a devout Christian who believed the mathematical principles unifying the natural world actually were derived from God, and that the role of scientists is to discover the intricacy and sanctity of such divine creation. But the most noticeable change was that God turned from an omniscient father into a "divine clockmaker." As new scientific findings demonstrated that the operation of the world is subject to some predictable and objective laws, the belief that God is the "clockmaker"—the constructor of these laws who does not directly intervene in the world—became prevalent [8]. This deism, or "rationalized theology," combined scientific rationalism with the traditional belief in God, marking a typical characteristic: the universe is rational, and God is the ultimate symbol of reason. In this view, the duty of scientists is to use empirical evidence to discover patterns behind natural phenomena and decipher the ultimate mathematician's—the God's—mind in his creation [7].

Combining scientific discoveries, the decline of religious authority, and the birth of deism, the Scientific Revolution would eventually contribute to the formation of a "modernity framework"

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centered on rationality, progressivism, science, and knowledge. The formation of this new framework involved numerous steps: it began when humans used reason and various new scientific methods to observe and understand the world. By summarization, these insights and empirical evidence become science and knowledge. Since science reflects the predictable natural laws governing the world, they are objective and independent of personal interpretation. God is the ultimate designer of this rational order and represents the peak of reason. Then, when people apply these objective laws and objective knowledge to human society, they can achieve continuous progress and make the society increasingly perfect, creating a utopia where all people are freed from anguish, hunger, and inequality. Similarly, through rationality, humans themselves can become increasingly perfect. Therefore, all this suggests that people must be optimistic about the progress of society (progressivism), with rationalism serving as the sole driving force. Humans must also be subjected to the laws of reason, and everything inconsistent with reason and rationalism should be abandoned.

On the other hand, these religious and ideological changes promoted the Scientific Revolution. Since traditional Christian authority decreased, people and scholars adopted the modernity framework's emphasis on rationality. They began to partially abandon old religious interpretations and to use inductive and deductive reasoning, along with empirical evidence, to understand the world. No longer relying on traditional interpretation, therefore, scientists invented new methods, theories, and mathematical tools, leading to a direct increase in scientific discoveries.

Moreover, changes in religious ideology itself contributed to scientific development, especially in England and the Netherlands. Some Puritans and Calvinists thought that inquiring into the nature and the physical world created by God is, in fact, an act of glorifying God. Most scientists in the Baroque era did not embrace atheism, and for some, their motivation toward scientific discovery can even be traced to deeply devout theological beliefs. They firmly believed that mathematics and experimentation could reveal the mysteries of God embedded in nature, and many great scientists themselves, such as Descartes, Kepler, and Newton, remained devout Christians. Some scientists who turned to deism also argued that since God is the supreme designer of natural order, the world he created must be explainable by mathematical reasoning. These religious motivations, driven by religious change, also contributed to scientific development.

To a larger extent, religious change indirectly contributed to the formation of new characteristics in European society through its interplay with the Scientific Revolution and state-building. Firstly, as the modernity framework and progressivism permeated society, they provided a robust rationale for European colonization. Many Europeans at that time viewed Europe as the pinnacle of civilization and argued that rationalism provided an unprecedented order that justified subjugating other peoples to civilize the savage, bring rationalism and progress, and defeating superstition while keeping the world in order. However, in most cases, colonization didn't bring civilization and cultural enlightenment to other people, but promoted state-building of transoceanic maritime empires at a cost of bringing death, hunger, and anguish to indigenous peoples. The Scientific Revolution also contributed to state-building by advancing weaponry, making colonization easier through technical superiority. This combination of ideological change (modernity framework) and technological improvements intensified colonization, eventually leading to the formation of a world market, a transition from rigid mercantilism toward commercial capitalism, and financial modernization. This chain effect can be traced to religious change.

Furthermore, the Scientific Revolution aided state-building by giving governors pretexts to establish a centralized authority, which demonstrated the potential risks of the modernity framework. The rationalism that this new framework espouses is the "instrumental rationality", which is based

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on empirical calculation, quantifiable measurement, and combines with the "absolute truth (for instance, scientists at that time thought knowledge derived from reasoning is completely objective and devoid of any subjectivity caused by individual interpretation) to comprehend the world, pursuing the idea that rationality is greater than anything else [9]. This squeezed out the space for humanitarian thinking to use emotion and subjectivity to reflect on the value of human life. Also, the idea of progressivism (meaning that humans can achieve infinite progress through reasoning) clearly has "utopian" characteristics, meaning that it's unrealistic to some extent. When the absolute "instrumental rationality" merges with the utopian progressivism and the rejection of the humanities, it creates a "grand narration" that holds instrumental rationality at its peak while denouncing everything irrational. This narration is not based on politics but lays its foundation in the modernity framework. However, when political authorities try to utilize this philosophical narration as a means of centralization, it could lead to great tragedies that completely deviate from the progressivism in the modernity framework and seem unimaginable to people who ardently support this framework at first. Indeed, the mingling of political powers with the grand narration in the modernity framework justifies many actions done by the governors, forming a "tyranny of facts" and ultimately becoming a potential road leading to political tyranny [10]. Some tragedies caused by instrumental rationality, in fact, would eventually occur after the Baroque period, leading to the postmodern reflection on the modernity framework.

5. Conclusion

Overall, these three factors mentioned in the essay—reformation, state-building, and scientific revolution—all engendered an intricate and intertwined mutual relationship with religious change, instead of a one-way cause and effect. However, all these reciprocal relations don't just stay in divergence, but they eventually converge into one single point—secularization. If there were no secularization happening, not only would the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the "modernity framework" not exist, but the modern technology, the political system, and the international situation would also not form. However, when tracing the cause of European secularization, one factor is always non-negligible—the continuous religious evolution that steadily, but profoundly and permanently, shaped the development of European civilization. The modernity framework that emphasized pure rationality, science, and progress was derived from the gradual secularization, and it made fundamental changes to human thoughts over time. In the end, however, this symbol of modernism neither broke up with traditional spiritual pursuit nor caused the disappearance of religion, but it finally mingled with traditional Christian faith—the tranquil prayers and sensation of the arts—and collectively molded the soul and spirit of modern Europe. No matter what, we should acknowledge that the formation of this spirit cannot happen without the incessantly changing role that religion plays in one's life and in society.

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